Sin and the Human Condition
Luke 18:9-14
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One time when the story of the Pharisee and tax collector was studied by a first grade Sunday School class, after the two characters had been dramatically portrayed ~~and the lesson of humility thoroughly expounded~~, the teacher said, "And now children, let's thank God that we are not like that mean old Pharisee". The universal human propensity toward egotism or pride at the expense of someone else was investigated and in the course of that very investigation showed its presence. That's the way it is with us, it seems. Inherently within us is a terrible need to be someone by comparing ourselves unfairly with another person. Jesus was not a philosopher. He did not, as far as we know, define sin, nor did he discuss it in the abstract. What he did was to point to the particular behavior, and the attitudes and motivations behind the behavior, which separated men from God and from each other. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is perhaps the most devastating commentary on the human condition you and I are ever likely to confront.

Let's think about the story for a moment. As is usually the case with the parables of Jesus it is deceptively simple, set in a common, every day situation. Two men came to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, a pillar of religion, a patriot, an honest, generous, respected man. The other was a tax collector or Publican, a Jew who had agreed to work for the Roman authorities by collecting their taxes and who was authorized to keep for his own any money he could collect over and above the official per-capita tax. In short, he was both a traitor and a thief.

The comparison between the two could not have been drawn more dramatically.

When the Pharisee prayed he gave an accounting of the vices from which he abstained and the good works he had performed. He gave thanks to God that he was so demonstrably superior to other men - particularly the tax collector. The Tax collector, on the other hand, was so aware of his inferiority that he did not even approach the altar, but stood far off, and with downcast eyes asked for God's mercy. Jesus' comment on the situation was that God approved of the tax collector, but not the Pharisee.

Now, Jesus was not generalizing about all Pharisees. In fact, it has been observed that what he said was a caricature: Pharisees didn't act like that. Nor is it probable that a tax collector would show up in the Temple, let alone to pray with such beautiful sincerity. The point of this rather staged situation then is in the little proverb which follows: "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." Jesus would have approved of the Pharisee's conduct and it is certain that he would have found the tax collector's treachery offensive. He was talking about pride: the pride that interferes with a man's relationship with his God and fellow man regardless of the relative moral value of the particular behavior he happens to be exhibiting. The Pharisee was doing a good thing; he was praying. But even his prayer was the instrument of alienation, separation, between his fellow man & himself, and thus between God & himself.

Christian thinkers have consistently regarded pride or egotism as the basic understanding about the human condition. In theology pride is not simply one of man's shortcomings, but the fundamental condition which is expressed in all sorts of wrong behavior. That is what is pointed to and documented by the parable of the two men in the Temple. And it is to that which I wish to draw your attention this morning.

We asked last Sunday "Whatever Happened to Sin?", and concluded that sin has disappeared because of the long process which has reduced our sense of individual responsibility. Sin became crime which became the symptom of sickness. At the same time we concluded that religion has been less than helpful by singling out petty vices as the locus of all evil and neglecting the advice of the late Paul Tillich who insisted that "Sin is a condition before it becomes an act." So, this morning, a look at the Condition of mankind which preceeds wrong or sinful behavior.

In the story of The Fall of man in the third chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve broke the rules: they refused to live within the limits God had set for them. It seemed rather arbitrary - to eat or not to eat the apple, but what really was at stake was that in eating the apple they would become like God.

Religious fantasy? Listen to Bertrand Russell, hardly an apologist ~~an opponent of~~ for Christianity: "Of the infinite desires of man the chief are the desires for power and glory... Every man would like to be God, if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility!" (Power, A New Social Analysis, p. 11)

Or listen to the testimony of psychiatry in the writing of Karl Menninger: "Arrogance, narcissism and egocentrism are usually symptomatic residuals of early ego injury. They serve to salve unhealed wounds of self-esteem ~~or persistent diffidence and fears of contact~~, but the remedy can be most obnoxious to one's fellows." (Karl Menninger, Whatever Became of Sin, p. 135)

The psychiatrist suggests that people may become proud, arrogant, agressive and harmful to other people in order to compensate for earlier ego damage. The assumption is that if you are fortunate enough not to

have experienced early ego damage you will not need to be proud, arrogant and agressive. Christian theology responds that all men suffer a form of ego damage, not at the hands of their parents, but as a consequence of their humanity.

Alone in creation man is aware of his finiteness, his mortality. Dogs are finite too, but they don't know it: they don't worry about it: they do not feel the least bit insecure in the face of fate. Every day is eternity for a dog: they are happily unaware that they will die one day, that the world is literally full of threats to their existence. The only anxieties dogs seem to have are those caused by us. But we are different: we know: we are mortal and painfully aware of it. Our parents may love us totally - we may be sheltered, protected, supported, esteemed but one day we know - we are finite. That, the theologians tell us, is basic: it is our basic anxiety, our fundamental insecurity, our original ego damage.

Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote the definitive work on the subject observed, "...all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life... The truth is that man is tempted by the basic insecurity of human existence to make himself doubly secure and by the insignificance of his place in the total scheme of life to prove his significance." (The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I p 181; 192)

Suddenly, Adam and Eve begin to look a great deal like all men and all women. A lot of what we do derives from our deepest insecurities: it is frankly intended to document our worth, our significance, our importance, and ultimately our defiance of our own mortality. Some of us are more blatant about it than others.

The Pharohs of Egypt consumed the resources of their land in order to construct pyramids, symbols of their immortality. Langdon Gilkey observes, "Our infinite human hunger for wealth, prominence and place

is in large part an effort to amass power in some form ~~[illegible]~~ to guard against the threat of fate, that unpredictable force of destiny ... ~~that can snatch from our contingent hands these guards for our security and so for our existence.~~" (Naming the Whirlwind p 323)

Or more immediately, when the transport planes were evacuating DaNang, South Vietnamese soldiers pushed aside, tramped over, or shot if necessary, the women and children who stood between them and their security.

Pride (or egotism), the theologians tell us, is a product of our ultimate insecurity. It is the universal condition of man which makes sin original. That is the testimony of the men who have thought most articulately about us: Augustine, Pascal, Luther, Acquinas, Calvin. ⊛

But don't take it from the philosophers. Simply observe human behaviour.

Our basic egotism or self-centeredness is expressed as intellectual pride, moral pride, spiritual pride. We can't all be King or President - and thus feel a little bit infinite. We can't all be Chairman of the Board, or a General or President of the club or even head of the house, and thus feel a little bit omnipotent. But regardless of our relative station in life we can feel right: we can feel that our ideas are correct, ultimately correct and that our brilliance is revealed in comparison with the dullness of the people with whom we must deal. How many arguments, extensions over ideas, are merely the working out of original sin, or egotism! ⊛ Even great intellectuals, who ought to know better, regard themselves as possessors of ultimate, unending truth. "Hegel not only proclaimed the finality of his own thought but regarded his contemporary Prussian military state as the culmination of human history." (Neibuhr, p 196) So did Adolph Hitler with his vaunted "Thousand Year Reich."

⊛ our vain efforts to stake out an area of domination in which we are right and therefore secure?

When a college Sophomore comes home at Xmas and takes on Dad about politics, economics, religion - surely this is at least part of what is happening.

because of our egotism,

Morally, we judge ourselves by our own standards which, we assume are the ultimate standards. Even virtue can become the vehicle of moral pride - which is why the new Testament is so consistantly critical of the righteous. Self - righteousness is not only distasteful, it is the philosophic basis for a lot of history's cruelest and most arrogant escapades. One of the keystones in Nazi theory was the assertion that Germans were morally superior to the rest of the world which was always described as decadent. Under the guise of "Manifest Destiny", hundreds of thousands of native Americans were dispatched because they were regarded as pagan - morally inferior.

Moral pride is close to and often becomes spiritual pride. ("My religion is ultimately right and yours is ultimately wrong.") Neibuhr called it the "ultimate sin", and went on to comment: "religion is not simply as is generally supposed an inherently virtuous human quest for God. It is merely a final battle-ground between God and man's self-esteem. In that battle even the most pious practices may be the instruments of human pride." (Ibid. p 200)

There are, for instance, religious groups which are highly visible, and which flagrantly appeal to basic human insecurity by insisting, very vocally, that they are the true faith, the true church, standing alone against the evils of all the rest of us. That is sin, the sin of spiritual Pride, and it seems to me that we ought to call it that - whenever any man, or institution, claims ultimate, exclusive knowledge of the truth. And yet, we must proceed with care. For even the Reformers - the greatest teachers of human sinfulness - used their doctrinal postures arrogantly against theological opponents. We never want to forget that John Calvin, with his immense sensitivity to man's sin and God's grace, agreed to the burning of a man by the name of Servetus at the stake.

(2) Our text is simply one of many in which this theme is dominant. The Ph. was doing something good - praying - but even his prayer was instant of allocation, a separation between self and others - and self & God

+ Injustice is the result. | If I am superior: | if others exist in order serve as foils for my personal esteem, then I may and probably will oppress those whose skin color is different: | I may use others sexually for my own gratification: | I may tramp on them, push them around, humiliate them - because it makes me feel good.

Egotism - pride - self-centeredness, inevitably lead to the using of other people. | Collectively, the sin of pride leads to disaster. | An Italian statesman once observed that "if we conducted our personal affairs as we conduct the affairs of state, what rascals we would be." Frederick the Great was no moralist but he observed: "I hope that posterity will distinguish the philosopher from the monarch in me and the decent man from the politician. | I must admit that when drawn into the vortex of European politics it is difficult to preserve decency and integrity." (Ibid. p. 209)

Collective egotism becomes, in terms of the state, blind patriotism. | It enables the individual to find in the myth of the nation, or the super race, the power and immortality and prestige that he needs so desparately. | Collective egotism leads to totalitarianism: | it is the breeding ground for history's consistant record of ("War and rumors of War".) It's final foe has always been religion - which has been able to see it for what it is. | It is no accident that tyranny and Christianity have not gotten along very well, nor that the Church historically has been an uneasy and sometimes embarassing ally of the state.

Jesus was no philpsopher. | But he did point to the behavior - and the attitudes beneath the behavior - that separates men from each other. On a personal level the sin of pride motivates us to play games rather than loving, celebrating and affirming each other. The original game, one psychiatrist suggests, is ("Mine is better that yours",) and we play it all our lives. | ("My daddy is stronger than your daddy": | then it became a little more sophisticated - ("my bike is faster than your bike": | "my history test was tougher than your history test". | In adulthood, ("my trip was more exciting than your trip,) my children are smarter, | my plans grander, | my lawn greener, my golf score lower" | and with great subtlety, ("my crises more severe,

my operation more critical, my burdens heavier": all of them variations on that original game ("mine is better than yours"): all of them personal manifestations of that fundamental human anxiety over our insecurity and our terrible need to assert ourselves at the expense of someone else, all of them reasons why our relationships sometimes seem ~~flat~~ flat, stale, lifeless.

Now, this has not been a very happy sermon - which, perhaps, is why you don't hear many sermons on sin. In fact, if you are still with me a state of despair may have set in. What's to become of us? If we can't help ourselves, if all our little sins of pride, all our games of ("mine is letter than yours") are multiplied into national and racial and sectarian Sin with a capital S on the grand, historical scale, is there really any reason to be hopeful about mankind?

Many, in fact, would answer "no". The cynic sees no reason for optimism in the human condition. The atheist, if he is honest, must ultimately become paranoid. St. Paul, after struggling with his inability to do even the things he knew were right cried out ("Who will deliver me?")

The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not look at the world, or us, through rose tinted spectacles. Rather, as I understand it, it encourages us to be candid, as we have been this AM - brutally honest, about ourselves: and then in our candor to see and to laugh at our little pretensions, our posturing, our game playing: our sins of egotism and pride. because, ultimately we are rather amusing: it is too honest for that: it knows that we will inevitably feel proud of our efforts. The Gospel of J.C. does not simply urge us to try harder. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, as I understand it, offers the only resolution that makes any sense at all. It's called forgiveness, grace, acceptance.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that while God condems our sin - he does not condemn us because of our sin. Rather he forgives it - when

we come to terms with it and confess it. The Good News of Jesus Christ is that God loves us in spite of our sin: that he does accept us as we are, that we don't have to prove anything to him nor do we have to use our neighbors for our own self-enhancement, nor do we have battle to document our worth + significance. He loves us - and that is our worth, our significance.

The Gospel is Good News because it promises a better way: that as we know ourselves to be loved and forgiven and accepted by God we can ~~begin to~~ love and forgive and accept ~~each other~~ ourselves. - and then love + affirm each other.

One time, in a moment of awful clarity, the Apostle Peter cried, ("Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man".) Jesus didn't dispute Peter's self-assessment. But neither did he depart. Amen.

Father, give us courage to be honest with ourselves, and to relinquish the games we play with each other. Help us in that most difficult religious act - to accept the fact that we are accepted: Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.